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SUBJECT: NINEWA: ASSYRIAN PATRIARCH VISIT AND PROPOSAL FOR ASSYRIAN HOMELAND

Classified By: Nineva PRT Leader James Knight. Reasons 1.4(b) and (d). This is a Nineva Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) message.

Summary

¶1. (C) The Patriarch of the Assyrian Church of the East and his primary non-clerical interlocutor in Iraq, Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) Minister of Finance and leading Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) member Sarkis Aghajan Mamando 'Sarkesi', concur that Assyrian Christians enjoy unprecedented freedom from persecution and opportunity in the KRG. To assure these benefits become permanent, Sarkesi -- tacitly supported by the Patriarch -- strongly advocates the establishment of an autonomous Assyrian homeland carved out of the Nineva Plain under the protection of the KRG. Sarkesi, like other KRG leaders who advocate incorporation of all historically Kurdish areas into the KRG, is unconcerned about social or political disruption upon establishment of such an area. End summary.

Home again . . .

¶2. (C) His Holiness Mar ('Blessed') Kh'nanya Dinkha IV, Catholicos Patriarch of the Holy Apostolic Catholic Assyrian Church of the East, began this visit to Iraq 17 Sep 2006 -- his first return to Iraq since moving to Chicago in 1980 to escape rising repression of Christians in Iraq. Mar Dinkha's monthlong visit was sponsored on a personal basis by Sarkesi. Mar Dinkha was joined on this pilgrimage by other ranking Assyrian clerics, including the Metropolitan Bishops of Baghdad, Dahuk and Russia, North America, and Lebanon and Jordan.

¶3. (C) PRT Leader Knight and COL Kenneth Lull, Deputy Commander for the 25th Infantry Division Tactical HQ (Forward), met Mar Dinkha at Sarkesi's private residence in Erbil 12 Oct. This meeting was scheduled to review circumstances of Christians in northern Iraq and the evolution of Christian communities in this area. COL Lull has 25th ID engagement responsibility for Christian issues in Nineva and the KRG. The Metropolitans noted para (2) also attended.

. . . since things are well in the KRG . . .

¶4. (C) Mar Dinkha was lyrical in his praise for the freedom from persecution his flock enjoys in the KRG, and observed that during this visit he met KRG President Barzani and the Mufti of Erbil, as well as leaders of all Christian communities in the KRG
(Note: mostly Assyrians, Chaldeans, and Roman Catholics, as well as a small Evangelical group. Assyrians and Chaldeans share roots, but the Chaldean church recognizes the authority of the Pope, while Assyrians consider Mar Dinkha the Pope's peer. End note). He emphatically pointed to Sarkesi's patronage as the key to Assyrians' good circumstances in Dahuk and Erbil. He emphasized his church's 2000-year history and the Assyrians' 7000 years (sic) in what is now northern Iraq, and their difficult experience in recent and historical times.

. . . thanks to Sarkesi . . .

¶5. (C) COL Lull pointed out that he is Task Force Lightning DCO BG Wiercinski's delegate for Iraqi Christian issues. COL Lull noted that he has visited several Christian areas in Ninewa, and has made contact with Assyrian Democratic Movement representatives. Mar Dinkha responded energetically that COL Lull should instead 'go to the source' and speak directly to Assyrians. He pointed enthusiastically at Sarkesi, insisting that he is the key individual who 'knows Assyrian issues'. Mar Dinkha was equally dismissive of Assyrian-American associations and the Assyrian Academic Society -- in response to a Team Leader query on their roles, Mar

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Dinkha answered vaguely that he 'had heard of them'. Mar Dinkha's translator and secretary (Fr. Georgeese Tanoor, also resident with Mar Dinkha in Chicago) interjected that they 'held picnics' to raise money for Assyrians in Iraq.

¶6. (C) Mar Dinkha declined to answer a Team Leader query regarding conditions for Christians in Ninewa Province, referring the question to Sarkesi. Sarkesi echoed Mar Dinkha's evocation of the golden Assyrian past, but lamented the persecution Assyrians have endured from Muslims, Christian Crusaders, and Jews. At present Christians in Mosul city are under constant intimidation, and to a lesser extent elsewhere in Ninewa province. He noted the 11 Oct murder by beheading and dismemberment of an Assyrian priest kidnapped in Mosul, and pointed out that every church in Mosul has been damaged by bombings. Sarkesi found this situation particularly tragic since Mosul is the cultural capital of Assyria. (Note: Mosul is the site of the Assyrian city of Nineveh. End note.)

¶7. (C) The Assyrian Metropolitan for Baghdad (Mar Gewargis Sliwa) interjected that Christians are leaving Bagdad in great numbers owing to the violence there. Both he and Sarkesi pointed out that most have fled in the first instance to Jordan or Syria; those resettling in Dahuk Province and the Ninewa Plain are have arrived via Syria.

. . . but Assyrians need a homeland

¶8. (C) Sarkesi continued that he and his fellow Christians believe that Coalition forces had been 'sent by God' to Iraq. However, ongoing persecution and intimidation of Christians and their prospects once Coalition forces depart require establishment

of an autonomous Assyrian region. Sarkesi elaborated that the Assyrian heartland is between the Tigris and Great Zab rivers, extending from their confluence to the Turkish border. Within that area, he proposes an Assyrian district on the Ninewa Plain, in the area bounded by al-Qosh, the eastern edge of Mosul, Qara Qosh, and Ayn Sifni (Shikhan district). (Note: This entire area is currently part of Ninewa Province. End Note.)

¶19. (C) Sarkesi continued that he would seek autonomy for this region on par with that currently enjoyed by the KRG. He is confident that he will elicit support of KRG leaders for this proposal, including underwriting the autonomy he considers essential to preserve the Assyrian people and their culture.

¶10. (C) Team Leader Knight responded that the USG wants Iraq to be as Iraqis wish it to be, and that we support political arrangements that are fair and reflect national Iraqi consensus. However, no effort to carve out homelands for specific ethnic or sectarian groups from mixed areas has been peaceful. TL Knight asked how reoccupation of traditional Christian land and villages could be done without significant resistance from those now resident in those areas. Sarkesi responded that he expected Arabs and others would willingly return to their areas of origin, adding that he expected some form of compensation would be offered.

Comment

¶11. (C) Mar Dinkha was as circumspect regarding events and trends in Ninewa as he was effusive in his praise for the KRG. It is not clear whether he visited any Christian communities in Ninewa, but he left commentary on areas outside the KRG to his lay brother Sarkesi. However, he was quick to identify Sarkesi as the only appropriate interlocutor for Coalition and USG representatives for Assyrian Christian matters. It is clear Mar Dinkha considers the Assyrian-American Society (IAS), the Assyrian-American National Federation, and similar U.S.-based advocacy groups essentially irrelevant. Similarly, he apparently considers the Assyrian Democratic

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Movement a vanity party that does not speak for Chaldo-Assyrians.

¶12. (C) In his pursuit of Christian welfare, Sarkesi shares his Kurdish compatriots' indifference to disruptions his territorial program might cause. To the extent that it is pursued, it will be perceived by Ninewa's Sunnis and non-Christian minorities as another facet of Kurd expansionism in Ninewa, and will feed the possibility of violent reaction to Kurdish expansionism.

Bio note

¶13. (C) This meeting was devoted almost entirely devoted to Christian issues and only tangentially addressed Sarkesi's significant role in the KDP and the KRG's government. On other occasions Sarkesi has privately expressed reservations about the KDP as a governing party and its management of the KRG. Nonetheless, he maintains that the KDP remains the best vehicle for his own priorities, including economic recovery of the KRG and protection of

Assyrian Christians. One example of this ambivalence emerged in this meeting, when TL Knight asked how his program for a Christian autonomous region fits within the larger Kurdish agenda for 'disputed territories'. Sarkesi expressed dismay at the headlong rush of the KDP to include disputed territories as part of Kurdistan in the revised regional Constitution.

¶14. (C) Sarkesi has been the major promoter of resettlement of Assyrians and Chaldean Christians in areas which will constitute his proposed Assyrian homeland. He has expended a significant portion of his very large personal fortune to assist Christians to relocate to the KRG and the Nineva Plain, including construction of several hundred homes and providing a USD 100- monthly stipend for families without other income. His efforts as a benefactor of Iraqi Christians have elicited recognition by Pope Benedict, who named him a Knight Commander of the Order of Saint Gregory the Great in August 2006. Sarkesi maintains a low profile on such matters, and specifically asked that the USG be discreet in sharing information pointing to his personal role as a benefactor of Christian communities in the north.

KHALILZAD